

Lesotho received a downward trend arrow due to a failed military coup in August, which shook the country's political institutions and left lasting tensions.

On August 30, 2014, Lieutenant General Tlali Kamoli failed to oust Prime Minister Thomas Thabane of the All Basotho Convention in a largely nonviolent coup. Kamoli along with a number of soldiers attacked several police stations, forcing the prime minister to temporarily flee to neighboring South Africa. Thabane returned to Lesotho in early September. At the end of the month, a shootout, allegedly connected to the attempted coup, between police and military forces left two police officers injured. Kamoli escaped to the mountains with approximately 200 soldiers and a large number of weapons. Fearing a motion of confidence, Thabane had suspended the Parliament in June. The Southern African Development Community helped bring about the reopening of Parliament in October.

The political situation in the country remained tense at the end of the year, with members of parliament saying the peace deal may be derailed if provisions that give the president the power to prorogue Parliament are not removed from the constitution.

Lesotho has an adult HIV/AIDS prevalence rate of approximately one in four; more than half of these are women. The government offers free HIV testing to all citizens; however 42 percent of those infected are unable to access antiretroviral treatment.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 30 / 40 (-1) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 10 / 12

King Letsie III serves as ceremonial head of state. The lower house of Parliament, the National Assembly, comprises 120 seats; 80 are filled through first-past-the-post constituency votes and 40 through proportional representation. Members serve five-year terms, and the leader of the majority party becomes the prime minister. The Senate—the upper house of Parliament—consists of Lesotho's 22 principal chiefs, who wield considerable authority in rural areas, and 11 other members appointed by the ruling party.

Despite some preelection violence and a deeply divided result, the 2012 parliamentary elections were declared free and fair. Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili's newly formed Democratic Congress (DC) won 48 seats in the National Assembly but was unable to form a government. All Basotho Convention (ABC) leader Tom Thabane swiftly announced a 61-seat coalition with the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD), which had captured 26 seats, and the Basotho National Party, which claimed 5. Thabane peacefully took over as prime minister.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 12 / 16 (-1)

Lesotho was dominated by the LCD until the 2012 election, when an ABC-led coalition took power for the first time. The DC, which won the most seats, was formed after 45 members of Parliament broke off from

the LCD before the 2012 election. More than 15 parties and several independent candidates contested the 2012 elections; 12 gained representation.

The attempted coup increased military influence over the government. South Africa has been monitoring the development of Lesotho's political situation and has warned that it would not tolerate any unconstitutional changes in the government.

C. Functioning of Government: 8 / 12

In order to avoid a vote of no confidence, Prime Minister Thabane obtained permission from King Letsie III in June 2014 to suspend parliament for nine months. This followed the March 2014 collapse of the ruling coalition, when seven opposition parties presented a motion of no confidence to the government. Peace was shattered on August 30 when the army, led by General Kamoli, staged an attempted coup, which ultimately failed. Parliament reopened on October 18, despite Thabane's insistence on not reopening parliament until the coup perpetrators were arrested and brought to trial.

Thabane has support of the police, while his deputy, Mothetjoa Metsing—accused of being a co-conspirator in the coup attempt—has the support of the army. Metsing has denied the allegations, though he had vowed a new government coalition that would oust Thabane.

According to the African Peer Review Mechanism, corruption is rife in all sectors of government and public services, and cronyism is prevalent in state bidding procedures. Since 2012, all government officials must declare their financial interests as a condition of office, though implementation was spotty in 2014. Many believe that the political crisis that erupted in the country was due to corruption and crime. Deputy Prime Minister Metsing has been accused of deriving undue financial benefit during his time as a local government minister. He is being investigated and has since instituted his own claim to declare unconstitutional a provision that allows the government to access his banking details. The anticorruption watchdog, the Directorate on Corruption and Economic Offenses (DCEO), became autonomous in 2012 and has instituted a number of legal proceedings against corrupt officials. Lesotho was ranked 55 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 41 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 14 / 16

Freedoms of speech and the press are generally respected, and independent newspapers and radio stations routinely criticize the government. Despite the fact that state-owned print and broadcast media tend to reflect the views of the ruling party, Lesotho has seen a significant amount of media coverage of corrupt officials. Two of the three main newspapers in the country are owned by the same person. The government does not restrict internet access, though only about 5 percent of citizens have access due to infrastructure and socioeconomic constraints. During the attempted coup, radio and television stations were temporarily jammed.

Lesotho is a predominantly Christian country, and freedom of religion is widely observed. The government does not restrict academic freedom.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 7 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are generally respected, though demonstrations are sometimes broken up violently. Local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) generally operate without restrictions. While labor rights are constitutionally guaranteed, the union movement is weak and fragmented. Many employers in the textile sector—Lesotho’s largest formal employer—face obstacles when trying to join unions.

F. Rule of Law: 11 / 16

The instability in the country resulted in the temporary suspension of the courts in early September. Courts are nominally independent, but higher courts are subject to outside influence. The large backlog of cases often leads to trial delays and lengthy pretrial detention. Mistreatment of civilians by security forces reportedly continues. Prisons are dilapidated, severely overcrowded, and lack essential health services; instances of torture and use of excessive force have been reported. An independent ombudsman’s office is tasked with protecting citizens’ rights, but its enforcement powers are weak. The death penalty, although not used since 1995, is still legal in Lesotho for crimes of rape, murder, and treason.

Tensions between the Basotho and the community of Chinese migrant traders have grown in recent years as Chinese-owned small businesses have become more successful.

While female same-sex sexual activity is allowed, male same-sex “sodomy” is illegal; reportedly the law is not enforced. Still, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals face societal discrimination. Lesotho saw its first-ever gay pride march in 2013, organized by a local gay rights advocacy organization that first registered in 2010.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 9 / 16

According to the World Economic Forum, Lesotho ranks first in Africa and 48 in the world in bridging the gap between the sexes. Many women have taken on senior political and economic positions, including in government and senior management. The constitution bars gender-based discrimination, but customary practice and law still restrict women’s rights in the areas of property and inheritance. While their husbands are alive, women married under customary law have the status of minors in civil courts and may not enter into binding contracts.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology